

Columbia College Communication Program Review

Congruence with NCA Guidelines for Assessing Undergraduate Programs in Communication

Exit Report

The external reviewer appreciates the hospitality of Columbia College and willingness of the college to pilot test the recently passed National Communication Association [NCA] Guidelines for Assessing Undergraduate Programs in Communication. With over 8,000 members, NCA is the largest national organization to promote communication scholarship and education. Your use of the NCA guidelines will provide valuable feedback and a model for other communication programs seeking to engage in similar self-assessments. Hopefully, it will provide the program with additional focus as it moves forward using assessments to achieve its goals and improve its practices.

Guideline #1: Missions, Goals and Learning Outcomes

The program should have a clearly articulated mission and clearly specified goals that are tied to the institution's missions and goals. The program should also have clearly specified learning outcomes for each of the undergraduate programs. These goals and outcomes should be tied to assessment measures and the results of assessment should be incorporated in ongoing program refinements.

Columbia College's communication program has taken seriously the challenge of grounding its communication curriculum and program goals in the liberal arts tradition articulated in the college mission. The recent spotlight on the leadership component of the college mission has been widely adopted in communication syllabi and program goals. Students report experiencing leadership-related assignments in communication courses more than in other programs. Four of the five program faculty members published an article describing the program's efforts to infuse leadership into the curriculum as a model for other programs.

Program goals derive from the college's mission and are articulated in the Annual Academic Report. Assessment Reports for the past three years and faculty interviews offer considerable evidence that goals are updated annually based on assessments and refinements are made to instruction, curriculum, and assessment techniques.

Learning outcomes assessment appears to be happening in a more specific way than initially appeared to be the case upon reviewing the self-assessment narrative. All faculty members in the program are engaged in the assessment of learning outcomes in a spirit of self-improvement. The Assessment Rotation Plan spells out a clear calendar for outcomes assessment related to each learning outcome. The program distinguishes between assessments for majors and for general education. There was evidence in interviews that the assessment process itself is evaluated in an ongoing fashion with recent conversion from a three to a four-point scale. Innovative use of digital sampling is a strength of learning outcomes assessment in the program. It can be difficult to capture oral communication for future assessment or to create circumstances similar to the original communication moment when attempting to evaluate student attainment of oral competencies. Columbia College's current system would be a useful model to

programs struggling to capture and evaluate similar evidence of learning outcome achievements. While the communication program appears to be following Guideline #1, there are areas of concern:

Suggestion 1

Related Criteria

1.3 The program’s mission and goals should reflect how the program defines academic excellence in communication.

1.5 The program should have student learning outcomes that reflect the competencies, skills, and knowledge its graduates are expected to attain.

Upon review of Columbia College’s communication program self-assessment, members of the NCA Presidential Taskforce on Guidelines for Developing and Assessing Undergraduate Programs in Communication commented that learning outcomes, as explained in the program assessment were overly broad and more accurately described as program outcomes. Upon review of appendix material not available to the entire taskforce, it is apparent that Columbia College is doing an exemplary job of collecting, evaluating, and using learning outcomes data for communication program improvement. Including specific learning outcomes (currently contained in “results of measurement” in annual assessment report), descriptions of assessment measures, and evidence of improvements based on assessments (currently contained in “Comments and Recommendations for Improvement”) in the narrative of future assessment reports would more accurately depict current outcomes assessment practices for reviewers unfamiliar with Columbia College’s processes.

While the program’s use of innovative techniques (e.g. digital access to a random sample of students’ oral presentations) and clear presence of faculty “buy-in” to learning outcomes assessment and assessment-based improvements is commendable, questions still remain about the extent to which current learning outcomes reflect a common definition in the program of what constitutes “excellence in communication.” Accordingly, suggestion #1 is offered:

Suggestion 1: The external reviewer suggests that the program take steps to ensure common understandings of excellence for each learning outcome that supports the program’s mission.

Suggestion 2

Related Criterion

1.8 The program should have a clear, strong mechanism for the assessment and development of teaching.

While all evidence suggests the CC communication program is fortunate to have a group of talented and engaged teachers, assessment of and development of teaching seems to rely on student ratings of instruction and episodic evaluation (e.g. peer observation upon hire or on tenure-application). Given the central role of teaching to the mission of Columbia College, suggestion #2 is offered:

Suggestion 2: The external reviewer suggests that the program develop a clear, strong mechanism for the assessment and development of teaching.

Guideline #2: Administration and Governance

The communication program should have an organizational structure that supports and facilitates the achievement of its mission, goals, and objectives. There should be evidence of ongoing assessment of program leadership and faculty participation in decision-making.

Assessing the extent to which the organizational structure facilitates the communication program's achievement of its mission, goals, and objectives at this time is difficult. The college recently moved from a department structure to joining the larger division of Arts and Communication Studies. Discussions with faculty suggest the departmental identity surrounding the major is still in tact in the larger organizational structure. Leadership for the program is clearly defined (and happens to be a member of the communication faculty) with the appropriate authority to establish class schedules, assign faculty, administer the budget, and help the program achieve its mission. Faculty participate in decision-making, a fact made difficult by the current geographic lay out of the faculty and extra-program commitments. One theme that emerged in interviews with individual faculty members, division head, and president is the collaborative nature of the faculty. While ongoing assessment of program leadership is taking place, the reviewer found no evidence of staff and student participation in leadership assessment.

Suggestion 3

Related Criterion

2.6 The program should have a process for assessing the leadership that draws input from faculty, staff, and students.

Current evaluation of the division head incorporates input from faculty, but not staff or students. Evaluation plans for the newly created program coordinator role have not been developed yet.

Suggestion 3: The external reviewer recommends staff and student input be incorporated into division head evaluations and that a process for evaluating program coordinator performance be implemented that draws input from faculty, staff, and students.

Guideline #3: Resources and Personnel

The communication program should have sufficient resources to achieve its mission.

Administrative support, personnel, facilities, budget and equipment resources devoted to the program should be comparable in quantity and quality to similar programs within the institution and communication programs in comparable institutions.

Columbia College's communication program is doing a lot with a little. Two administrative assistants serve the four programs of the division and split their time between three locations on campus. The newly created program coordinator position is responsible for curriculum development and learning outcomes assessment as part of his regular faculty duties. As part of reorganization and in response to pressing budgetary needs all Columbia College programs recently underwent a cost-analysis, and while the communication budget is below the college average, there are other programs funded at similar levels. According to the 2008-2009 Committee One Data Report, the communication program generates SCHs at 81% of the college average for SCHs [COMM SCHs= 1939 and Overall Average SCHs=2375] and receives funding at 76% of the college average [COMM=\$309,683; College Average=\$404,596]. Resources in support of faculty development appear to be adequate. Faculty report support for conference travel, organization membership, journal subscriptions, and on-campus training

opportunities. Support for instructional activities includes extensive student mentoring through the Pearce Communication Center, technology in classrooms, and sufficient office space for work and meetings. IT support and library holdings appear sufficient to support the instructional and research needs of the program.

While the current facilities meet the minimum standards of providing a working space for the educational efforts of the program, facility repair should be an important goal of the college. Efforts have been made to repair Cottingham Theatre but water damage to the second-story ceilings appears to be ongoing. Theatre seats are threadbare. The building was without heat for much of the winter. Plans are underway to reconfigure the facility to better meet departmental needs and to repair the college's steam heat system. Improvements to the facility could only benefit the college's recruiting efforts.

Guideline #4: Faculty and Professional Staff

The communication program should have an adequate number of qualified full-time and continuing faculty and staff lines to meet its mission and goals.

Columbia College has assembled a highly qualified faculty for its Communication program. Each member of the faculty has at least a master's degree in communication, two with doctorates in the field. A review of faculty curricula vitae evidences considerable focus on teaching pedagogy, service to Columbia College, and research in communication. All five faculty members have published and presented nationally in their areas of expertise in an ongoing fashion. Students and alumni of the program offered many examples of receiving effective instruction in their communication classes and testified to the benefit of their communication education in college and professional success. The overall student-to-faculty ratio of 14:1 is commendable. With 100% of the faculty being full-time in fall 2009, the full-time to part-time ratio exceeds the expectations of comparable programs in the institution and in other similar communication programs throughout the country. Use of additional adjuncts might help the program develop and offer additional coursework. Despite considerable evidence of compliance with Guideline #4, the program does not appear to have an adequate number of full-time faculty to meet its mission and goals long term without additional faculty support, reduction in expectations of service, or creative thinking to address the current personnel shortfall.

Suggestion 4

Related Criteria

4.1 A program should have sufficient full-time continuing faculty and staff to meet its mission and assure high quality undergraduate education.

5.8 A communication program should have, proportionately, the same number of continuing program faculty members of various ranks as other comparable programs in the institution and communication programs in similar institutions across the country.

Appropriate measures of proportionality include but are not limited to: majors/FTE faculty; student credit hour FTE/faculty FTE; and full-time/part-time faculty ratios.

Each faculty member and administrator interviewed recognized the importance of sufficient full-time faculty for the communication program to achieve its mission and assure high quality undergraduate education in both the day and evening college. In addition to those aims, faculty and administration expressed a desire for the program to

- remain committed to students through extracurricular activities,
- continue attending campus events,

- recruit additional majors, and
- participate in a campus-wide initiative to pilot new curricula.

Faculty members internal to the program expressed a consistent wish to participate more actively in curricular development, recruiting, and other extracurricular support activities but feel unable to take on additional responsibilities. Of the five faculty members teaching communication courses, only one has communication instruction as his sole focus and three others have communication instruction as a secondary focus to administrative and student support duties, the fifth has internship and theatre duties. Interviews with out-of-department members indicate dual foci are common at Columbia College, but the percentage of faculty within a program with significant duties outside of instruction is typically smaller in other areas due to larger numbers of faculty in other programs. According to a 2009 National Communication Association survey of communication program chairs, the average faculty FTE for communication programs at private schools with 51-100 majors is 4.4. Columbia College's communication program has an FTE of 3.0. Program faculty seem aware that budget constraints of the past year and continuing trends into the foreseeable future are unlikely to produce additional lines for communication faculty in the near future. The external reviewer's interview with the Vice President for Academic Affairs confirmed that expectation.

Given the reality of the current budget crunch, the unique push for curricular development at this moment in Columbia College's history, the expectation of on-campus involvement intrinsic to the college's mission, and the recent loss of faculty lines in communication, suggestion #4 is offered:

Suggestion 4: The external reviewer recommends Columbia College make building sufficient full-time continuing faculty and staff to meet its mission and assure high quality undergraduate education a priority as budgets increase. In the interim, the college and program should explore creative ways to prioritize and achieve the most pressing goals and expectations.

Guideline #5: Hiring and Evaluation of Faculty, Promotion, and Tenure
Continuing full-time faculty should be involved in the recruiting and hiring decisions of new instructional staff for the program, both full and part-time as well as graduate students.

Hiring and evaluation in the Communication program is happening in an ethical and transparent manner. Program faculty report active involvement in developing position descriptions, searching for candidates, and making hiring decisions. A plan for attracting diverse faculty members has been developed and partially implemented (pending additional hiring it remains to be seen how effective the plan will be). Instructional staff members receive regular and systematic feedback on their performance through Columbia College's faculty evaluation process.

Guideline #6: Curriculum

The communication program should provide course offerings that enable students to meet the learning outcomes of the program with appropriate, balanced attention to theory, research, and application. In addition, the program should enable students to understand the challenges of and opportunities for effective and ethical communication in a diverse society.

Columbia College's communication curriculum is typical of communication programs nation wide. Curricular offerings are overtly connected to the college's liberal arts mission, program goals and

student learning outcomes. The student learning outcomes themselves are derived from the National Communication Association's definitions of communication learning outcomes. Coursework on theory, research, and application of communication knowledge is incorporated into the curriculum moving students from introductory courses through the capstone course. Attention has been paid to the content of COMM 100 to ensure that the service communication course meets the general education needs of the college while preserving the intellectual content and academic rigor of the course. Maximum enrollment caps and course rotations are appropriate to the mission of the college and to progressing students through the major in a timely fashion.

Student opportunities to work with faculty on research and service projects is commendable. A review of the self-study documentation and interviews with students and alumni reveal an exceptionally high level of support for student research and service endeavors in the program. Beyond student honor and philanthropic societies, the department supports an active agenda of student research. Communication majors routinely present their research at state and regional conferences. Faculty members have also designed courses to promote service learning and business networking in the community.

While the program is in compliance with Guideline #6, concern emerged over development of additional curricular offerings designed to attract students to the college. With the opportunities for research and traditional communication offerings, current communication majors should be able to see a clear connection between their coursework and graduate school opportunities. Similar clarity between the curriculum and a career path directly upon graduation may not be as obvious. Discussions of curricular emphases in political communication, organizational recruiting and training, new media, and/or communication enhanced diplomas for other majors should continue.

Guideline #7: Student Advising and Support Services

The communication program should provide students with appropriate levels of academic advising, support for classes, and professional development.

The program makes information and help available to students for academic planning and course selection. Students reported easy access to faculty and related specific advice they had received in planning their academic paths both in terms of prescriptive course selection and developmental advice regarding career planning. Extracurricular opportunities like Lambda Pi Eta and C-4 are offered to enhance student learning and development. Improvements to evaluation of advising, however, should be made:

Suggestion 5

Related Criterion

7.7 The availability and effectiveness of student advising should be evaluated as a part of the program's assessment program.

While the size and collaborative approach of the program creates a general awareness of advising successes and challenges, the communication program does not currently evaluate its advising efforts. Given the importance of effective advising to Columbia College's retention and progression efforts, suggestion #5 is offered:

Suggestion 5: The availability and effectiveness of student advising should be evaluated as a part of the program's assessment program.

